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REMARKS

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton
"Civil Society: Supporting Democracy in the 21st Century,"
at the Community of Democracies

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SECRETARY CLINTON: Well, I am delighted to be here with all of you. And I thank my friend, Foreign Minister Sikorski, for hosting us here in this absolutely magnificent setting, and for an excellent speech that so well summarized what the agenda for all of us who are members of the Community of Democracies should be.

The idea of bringing together free nations to strengthen democratic norms and institutions began as a joint venture between one of Radek's predecessors and one of mine: Minister Geremek and Madeleine Albright. And they were visionaries 10 years ago. And it was initially a joint American-Polish enterprise. And I cannot think of a better place for us to mark this occasion than right here in Krakow. Thank you, Madeleine, and thanks to the memory of Minister Geremek.

(Applause.)

SECRETARY CLINTON: I think you heard from Foreign Minister Sikorski some of the reasons why Poland is an example of what democracies can accomplish. After four decades of privation, stagnation, and fear under Communism, freedom dawned. And it was not only the personal freedoms that people were once again able to claim for their own, but Poland's per capital GDP today is nine times what it was in 1990. And in the middle of a deep, global recession, the Polish economy has continued to expand.

By any measure, Poland is stronger politically, as well. We all mourned with Poland in April when a plane crash claimed the lives of Poland's president, the first lady, and many other national officials. It was one of the greatest single losses of leadership suffered by any country in modern history. But it is a tribute to Poland's political evolution that, in the aftermath of that accident, the country's institutions never faltered. And tomorrow polls will move forward with selecting a president through free and fair elections.

Now, I would argue that this progress was neither accidental nor inevitable. It came about through a generation of work to improve governance, grow the private sector, and strengthen civil society. These three essential elements of a free nation -- representative government, a well-

functioning market, and civil society -- work like three legs of a stool. They lift and support nations as they reach for higher standards of progress and prosperity.

Now, I would be the first to admit that no democracy is perfect. In fact, our founders were smart enough to enshrine in our founding documents the idea that we had to keep moving toward a more perfect union. Because, after all, democracies rely on the wisdom and judgment of flawed human beings. But real democracies recognize the necessity of each side of that three-legged stool. And democracies that strengthen these three segments of society can deliver extraordinary results for their people.

Today I would like to focus on one leg of that stool: civil society. Now, markets and politics usually receive more attention. But civil society is every bit as important. And it undergirds both democratic governance and broad-based prosperity. Poland actually is a case study in how a vibrant civil society can produce progress. The heroes of the solidarity movement, people like Geremek and Lech Walesa and Adam Michnik, and millions of others laid the foundation for the Poland we see today. They knew that the Polish people desired and deserved more from their country. And they transformed that knowledge into one of history's greatest movements for positive change.

Now, not every nation has a civil society movement on the scale of Solidarity. But most countries do have a collection of activists, organizations, congregations, writers, and reporters that work through peaceful means to encourage governments to do better, to do better by their own people. Not all of these organizations or individuals are equally effective, of course. And they do represent a broad range of opinions. And, having been both in an NGO and led NGOs and been in government, I know that it's sometimes tough to deal with NGOs when you are in the government.

But it doesn't matter whether the goal is better laws or lower crime or cleaner air or social justice or consumer protection or entrepreneurship and innovation, societies move forward when the citizens that make up these groups are empowered to transform common interests into common actions that serve the common good.

As we meet here on the eve of our American Fourth of July celebration, the day when we commemorate our independence, I want to say a word about why the issue of civil society is so important to Americans. Our independence was a product of our civil society. Our civil society was pre-political. And it was only through debate, discussion, and civic activism that the United States of America came into being. We were a people before we were a nation. And civil society not only helped create our nation, it helped sustain and power our nation into the future. It was representatives of civil society who were the first to recognize that the American colonies could not continue without democratic governance. And after we won our independence, it was activists who helped establish our democracy. And they quickly recognized that they were a part of a broader struggle for human rights, human dignity, human progress.

Civil society has played an essential role in identifying and eradicating the injustices that have, throughout our history, separated our nation from the principles on which it was founded. It was civil society, after all, that gave us the abolitionists who fought the evils of slavery, the

suffragettes who campaigned for women's rights, the freedom marchers who demanded racial equality, the unions that championed the rights of labor, the conservationists who worked to protect our planet and climate.

I did begin my professional life in civil society. The NGO I worked for, the Children's Defense Fund, helped expand educational opportunities for poor children and children with disabilities, and tried to address the challenges faced by young people in prison.

Now, I would be the first to say that our work did not transform our nation or remake our government overnight. But when that kind of activism is multiplied across an entire country through the work of hundreds, even thousands of NGOs, it does produce real and lasting positive change. So a commitment to strengthening civil society has been one of my constants throughout my public career as First Lady, Senator, and now Secretary of State. I was able to work with Slovakian NGOs that stood up to and ultimately helped bring down an authoritarian government. I have seen civil society groups in India bring the benefits of economic empowerment to the most marginalized women in that society. I have watched in wonder as a small group of women activists in South Africa begin with nothing and went on to build a community of 50,000 homes.

President Obama shares this commitment. In his case, it led him to become a community organizer in Chicago. Both of us joined in the work of civil society because we believe that when citizens nudge leaders in the right direction, our country grows stronger. The greatness of the United States depends on our willingness to seek out and set right the areas where we fall short. For us and for every country, civil society is essential to political and economic progress. Even in the most challenging environments, civil society can help improve lives and empower citizens.

In fact, I want to recognize two women activists who are with us today from Afghanistan and Iran. If Faiza Babakan and Afifa Azim would stand up, I would just like to thank you for your courage and your willingness to be here.

(Applause.)

SECRETARY CLINTON: Now, it may seem to some of us like a very nice, but perhaps not essential presence to have just one woman from each country be here. But I can speak from personal experience that, just as civil society is essential to democracy, women are essential to civil society. And these women speak for so many who have never had a chance to have their voices heard.

So, along with well-functioning markets and responsible, accountable government, progress in the 21st century depends on the ability of individuals to coalesce around shared goals, and harness the power of their convictions. But when governments crack down on the right of citizens to work together, as they have throughout history, societies fall into stagnation and decay.

North Korea, a country that cannot even feed its own people, has banned all civil society. In Cuba and Belarus, as Radek said, civil society operates under extreme pressure. The Government

of Iran has turned its back on a rich tradition of civil society, perpetrating human rights abuses against many activists and ordinary citizens who just wanted the right to be heard.

There is also a broader group of countries where the walls are closing in on civic organizations. Over the last 6 years, 50 governments have issued new restrictions against NGOs, and the list of countries where civil society faces resistance is growing longer. In Zimbabwe, the Democratic Republic of Congo, physical violence directed against individual activists has been used to intimidate and silence entire sectors of civil society. Last year, Ethiopia imposed a series of strict new rules on NGOs. Very few groups have been able to re-register under this new framework, particularly organizations working on sensitive issues like human rights. The Middle East and North Africa are home to a diverse collection of civil society groups. But too many governments in the region still resort to intimidation, questionable legal practices, restrictions on NGO registration, efforts to silence bloggers.

I hope we will see progress on this issue, and especially in Egypt, where that country's vibrant civil society has often been subjected to government pressure in the form of canceled conferences, harassing phone calls, frequent reminders that the government can close organizations down, even detention and long-term imprisonment and exile.

In Central Asian countries, constitutions actually guarantee the right of association. But governments still place onerous restrictions on NGO activity, often through legislation or stringent registration requirements. Venezuela's leaders have tried to silence independent voices that seek to hold that government accountable. In Russia, while we welcome President Medvedev's statements in support of the rule of law, human rights activities and journalists have been targeted for assassination, and virtually none of these crimes have been solved.

And we continue to engage on civil society issues with China, where writer Liu Xiaobo is serving an 11-year prison sentence because he co-authored a document calling for respect for human rights and democratic reform. Too many governments are seeing civic activists as opponents, rather than partners. And as democracies, we must recognize that this trend is taking place against a broader backdrop.

In the 20th century, crackdowns against civil society frequently occurred under the guise of ideology. Since the demise of Communism, most crackdowns seem to be motivated instead by sheer power politics. But behind these actions, there is an idea, an alternative conception of how societies should be organized. And it is an idea that democracies must challenge. It is a belief that people are subservient to their government, rather than government being subservient to their people.

Now, this idea does not necessarily preclude citizens from forming groups that help their communities or promote their culture, or even support political causes. But it requires these private organizations to seek the state's approval, and to serve the states and the states' leaderships' larger agenda.

Think for a moment about the civil society activists around the world who have recently been harassed, censored, cut off from funding, arrested, prosecuted, even killed. Why did they provoke such persecution?

Some weren't engaged in political work at all. Some were not trying to change how their countries were governed. Most were simply getting help to people in need, like the Burmese activists imprisoned for organizing relief for victims of Cyclone Nargis. Some of them were exposing problems like corruption that their own governments claim they want to root out. Their offense was not just what they did, but the fact that they did it independently of their government. They were out doing what we would call good deeds, but doing them without permission. That refusal to allow people the chance to organize in support of a cause larger than themselves, but separate from the state, represents an assault on one of our fundamental democratic values.

The idea of pluralism is integral to our understanding of what it means to be a democracy. Democracies recognize that no one entity -- no state, no political party, no leader -- will ever have all the answers to the challenges we face. And, depending on their circumstances and traditions, people need the latitude to work toward and select their own solutions. Our democracies do not and should not look the same. Governments by the people, for the people, and of the people will look like the people they represent. But we all recognize the reality and importance of these differences. Pluralism flows from these differences. And because crackdowns on NGOs are a direct threat to pluralism, they also endanger democracy.

More than 60 years ago, Winston Churchill came to the United States to warn the world's democracies of an iron curtain descending across Europe. Today, thankfully, thanks to some of you in this room, that iron curtain has fallen. But we must be wary of the steel vise in which many governments around the world are slowly crushing civil society and the human spirit.

Today, meeting together as a community of democracies, it is our responsibility to address this crisis. Some of the countries engaging in these behaviors still claim to be democracies because they have elections. But, as I have said before, democracy requires far more than an election. It has to be a 365-day-a-year commitment, by government and citizens alike, to live up to the fundamental values of democracy, and accept the responsibilities of self government.

Democracies don't fear their own people. They recognize that citizens must be free to come together to advocate and agitate, to remind those entrusted with governance that they derive their authority from the governed. Restrictions on these rights only demonstrate the fear of illegitimate rulers, the cowardice of those who deny their citizens the protections they deserve. An attack on civic activism and civil society is an attack on democracy.

Now, sometimes I think that the leaders who are engaging in these actions truly believe they are acting in the best interests of their country. But they begin to inflate their own political interests, the interests of that country, and they begin to believe that they must stay in office by any means necessary, because only they can protect their country from all manner of danger.

Part of what it requires to be a true democracy is to understand that political power must be passed on, and that despite the intensity of elections, once the elections are over, whoever is elected fairly and freely must then try to unify the country, despite the political division.

I ran a very hard race against President Obama. I tried with all my might to beat him. I was not successful. And when he won, much to my surprise, he asked me to join his Administration to serve as Secretary of State. Well, in many countries, I learned as I began traveling, that was a matter of great curiosity. How could I work with someone whom I had tried to deprive of the office that he currently holds? But the answer for both President Obama and I was very simple. We both love our country. Politics is an important part of the lifeblood of a democracy. But governing, changing people's lives for the better, is the purpose one runs for office.

In the Community of Democracies, we have to begin asking the hard questions, whether countries that follow the example of authoritarian states and participate in this assault on civil society can truly call themselves democracies. And to address this challenge, civil society groups and democratic governments must come together around some common goals. The Community of Democracies is already bringing together governments and civil society organizations, some of whom are represented here. And it is well suited to lead these efforts. I know that the Community of Democracies working group on enabling and protecting civil society is already working to turn this vision into a reality. The United States pledges to work with this community to develop initiatives that support civil society and strengthen governments committed to democracy.

With the leadership and support of countries like Lithuania, Poland, Canada, and Mongolia, I believe that the Community's 20th anniversary could be a celebration of the expanding strength of civil society, and the true institutionalization of the habits of the heart that undergird democracy. To make that happen, our joint efforts, I believe, should include at least four elements. First, the Community of Democracies should work to establish, as Radek recommended, an objective, independent mechanism for monitoring repressive measures against NGOs.

Second, the United Nations Human Rights Council needs to do more to protect civil society. Freedom of association is the only freedom defined in the United Nations declaration of human rights that does not enjoy specific attention from the UN human rights machinery. That must change.

Third, we will be working with regional and other organizations, such as the OAS, the EU, the OIC, the African Union, the Arab League, others, to do more to defend the freedom of association. Many of these groups are already committed to upholding democratic principles on paper. But we need to make sure words are matched by actions.

And, fourth, we should coordinate our diplomatic pressure. I know that the Community of Democracies working group is focused on developing a rapid response mechanism to address situations where freedom of association comes under attack. Well, that can't happen soon enough. When NGOs come under threat, we should provide protection where we can, and amplify the voices of activists by meeting with them publicly at home and abroad, and citing

their work in what we say and do. We can also provide technical training that will help activists make use of new technologies such as social networks. When possible, we should also work together to provide deserving organizations with financial support for their efforts.

Now, there are some misconceptions around this issue, and I would like to address it. In the United States, as in many other democracies, it is legal and acceptable for private organizations to raise money abroad and receive grants from foreign governments, so long as the activities do not involve specifically banned sources, such as terrorist groups. Civic organizations in our country do not need the approval of the United States Government to receive funds from overseas. And foreign NGOs are active inside the United States. We welcome these groups in the belief that they make our nation stronger and deepen relationships between America and the rest of the world. And it is in that same spirit that the United States provides funding to foreign civil society organizations that are engaged in important work in their own countries. And we will continue this practice, and we would like to do more of it in partnership with other democracies.

As part of that commitment, today I am announcing the creation of a new fund to support the work of embattled NGOs. We hope this fund will be used to provide legal representation, communication technology such as cell phone and Internet access, and other forms of quick support to NGOs that are under siege. The United States will be contributing $2 million to this effort, and we welcome participation and contribution from like-minded countries, as well as private, not-for-profit organizations.

The persecution of civil society activists and organizations, whether they are fighting for justice and law, or clean and open government, or public health, or a safe environment, or honest elections, it's not just an attack against people we admire, it's an attack against our own fundamental beliefs. So when we defend these great people, we are defending an idea that has been and will remain essential to the success of every democracy. So the stakes are high for us, not just them.

For the United States, supporting civil society groups is a critical part of our work to advance democracy. But it's not the only part. Our national security strategy reaffirms that democratic values are a cornerstone of our foreign policy. Over time, as President Obama has said, America's values have been our best national security asset. I emphasized this point in December and January, when I delivered speeches on human rights and Internet freedom. And it is a guiding principle in every meeting I hold and every country I visit.

My current trip is a good example. I have just come from Ukraine, where I had the opportunity not only to meet with the foreign minister and the president, but with a wonderful group of young, bright Ukrainian students, where I discussed the importance of media freedom, the importance of freedom of assembly, and of human rights. Tonight I will leave for Azerbaijan, where I will meet with youth activists to discuss Internet freedom, and to raise the issue of the two imprisoned bloggers, and to discuss civil liberties. From there I will go to Armenia and Georgia, where I will be similarly raising these issues, and sitting down with leaders from women's groups and other NGOs. This is what we all have to do, day in and day out around the world.

So, let me return to that three-legged stool. Civil society is important for its own sake. But it also helps prop up and stabilize the other legs of the stool, governments and markets. Without the work of civic activists and pluralistic political discourse, governments grow brittle and may even topple. And without consumer advocates, unions, and social organizations that look out for the needs of societies' weakest members, markets can run wild and fail to generate broad-based prosperity.

We see all three legs of the stool as vital to progress in the 21st century. So we will continue raising democracy and human rights issues at the highest levels in our contacts with foreign governments, and we will continue promoting economic openness and competition as a means of spreading broad-based prosperity and shoring up representative governments who know they have to deliver results for democracy.

But we also believe that the principles that bring us here together represent humanity's brightest hope for a better future. As Foreign Minister Geremek wrote in his invitation to the inaugural meeting of the Community of Democracies 10 years ago, "Regardless of the problems inseparably associated with democracy, it is a system which best fulfills the aspirations of individuals, societies, and entire peoples, and most fully satisfies their needs of development, empowerment, and creativity."

So, ultimately, our work on these issues is about the type of future we want to leave to our children and grandchildren. And anyone who doubts this should look at Poland. The world we live in is more open, more secure, and more prosperous because of individuals like Lech Walesa, Adam Michnik, others who worked through the solidarity movement to improve conditions in their own country, and who stand for freedom and democracy.

I think often about the role of journalists. Journalists are under tremendous pressure. But a journalist like Jerse Tarovich, a son of Krakow, asked tough questions that challenged Poland to do better. And Pope John Paul II, who, as Stalin would have noted, had no battalions, marshaled moral authority that was as strong as any army. We all have inherited that legacy of courage. It is now up to us.

Every Fourth of July Americans affirm their belief that all human beings are created equal, that we are endowed by our creator with unalienable rights: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Today, as a community of democracies, let us make it our mission to secure those rights. We owe it to our forebears, and we owe it to future generations to continue the fight for these ideals.

Thank you all very much.

(Applause.)